

Supporting Children Through Family Separation Due to ICE Detention

A trauma-informed guide for
caregivers, educators, and
advocates

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Parenting Culture

FAMILY SEPARATION IS A TRAUMATIC EVENT THAT DISRUPTS A CHILD'S SENSE OF SAFETY, CONNECTION, AND IDENTITY. WHEN A PARENT IS DETAINED BY ICE, CHILDREN MAY EXPERIENCE FEAR, CONFUSION, ANGER, OR EMOTIONAL SHUTDOWN. ADULTS CAN SUPPORT CHILDREN'S HEALING BY PROVIDING CONSISTENCY, HONESTY, AND EMOTIONALLY SAFE RELATIONSHIPS.

1

ESTABLISH SAFETY AND PREDICTABILITY

Children feel safer when their environment is predictable.

- **If possible, stick to familiar routines.** If needed, create new, consistent routines that include as much of their old routines as possible.
- **Use visual schedules** to help children anticipate what's coming next.
- **Speak in a calm, steady voice** and keep transitions slow and supported. Familiarity helps the nervous system relax.

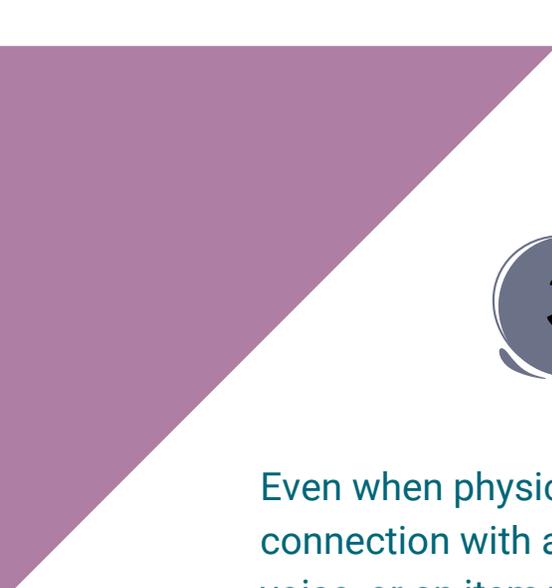
2

USE CLEAR, HONEST LANGUAGE

Avoid vague phrases like “they went away” or “they’re on a trip,” which can create more fear and confusion.

- **Use simple and direct language** that is emotionally honest and developmentally appropriate. For example, say, “Your mom is not here right now. She didn’t choose to leave. We are doing everything we can to help and to keep you safe.”
- Let the child know that **the separation is not their fault.**

Remember, children's developing brains may not be able to process adult details. Be honest but do not burden them with too much information. It's ok for older kids to receive an explanation about the immigration process in the US and what steps are being taken to support their family members, but keep information developmentally appropriate.

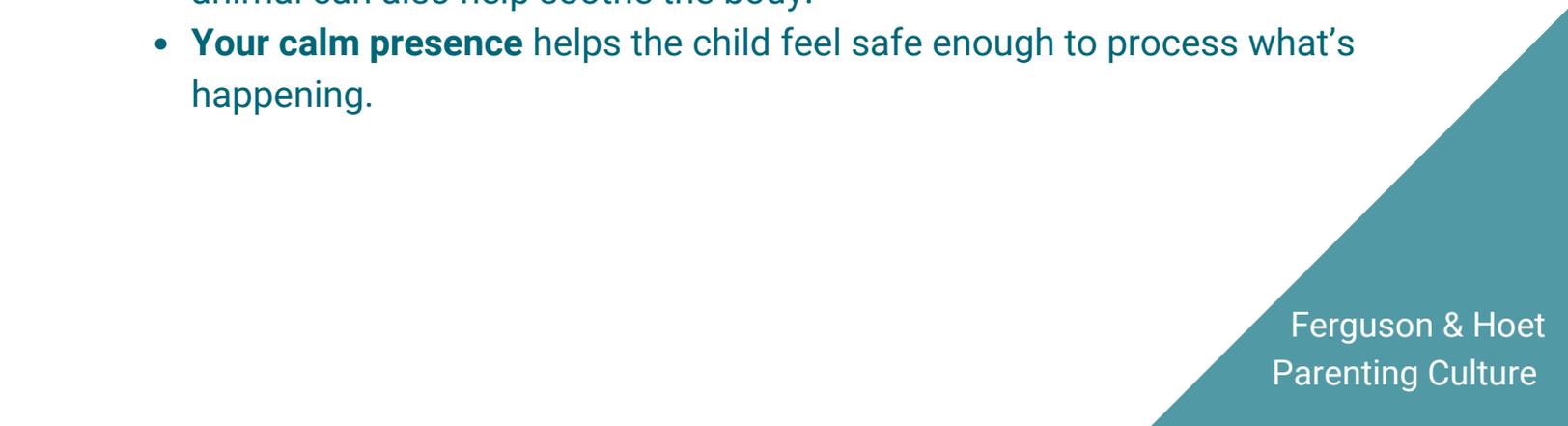


3

CREATE CONNECTION RITUALS

Even when physical contact isn't possible, children can maintain emotional connection with a detained parent. Use a photo, a recording of the parent's voice, or an item that smells like them.

- **Establish a daily ritual** like lighting a candle, saying the parent's name out loud, or drawing them a picture.
- **Write parents a letter or keep a daily journal** to log experiences and share with their caregivers when they are able to reconnect
- **Give the child space** to decide how they want to connect.
- Help and encourage the child **engage in activities they enjoy**



4

CO-REGULATE AND SUPPORT EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Children need adult help and support to feel safe to express their emotions.

- **Offer simple phrases** like, "It's okay to feel sad, scared, or confused. I'm here with you."
- **Use sensory tools** such as soft blankets, warm drinks, and quiet spaces to help regulate big feelings. Rocking, deep breathing, or holding a stuffed animal can also help soothe the body.
- **Your calm presence** helps the child feel safe enough to process what's happening.

5

SUPPORT THE ADULTS IN THEIR LIVES

Caregivers can experience extreme stress themselves and cannot support children if they are also under distress. You cannot pour from an empty cup. Before you can effectively support a child in your life, it is important you take care of yourself so you do not overwhelm them with your emotions.

- **Help adults access trauma-informed mental health care**, immigrant-led legal resources, and community caregiving networks.
- **Sharing caregiving responsibilities**, even temporarily, can reduce burnout and increase stability for the child.
- **Lean into community** and find others who can lend resources to help you navigate this time

6

LIMIT NEWS EXPOSURE

It can feel like the everchanging news cycle is important to stay tuned into; however, news and distressing social media can intensify anxiety and fear in children, particularly those affected by family separation. Sensationalized coverage of immigration or detention may provoke feelings of confusion or helplessness, as children often lack the emotional tools to process such complex information.

- **Limit news and social media** exposure for yourself and the children impacted
- **Gently guide screen time and conversations** toward positive, age-appropriate topics to nurture their well-being and reduce stress.

Final Note

Children do not heal in isolation. They recover in relationship. The consistent presence of a trusted adult who is emotionally available, honest, and calm can be a powerful source of perseverance. You don't have to have all the answers. Your presence is enough